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Virginia at War, 1864

Jack Trammell

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Review

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Davis, William C. (ed.) and Robertson, James I., Jr. (ed.). *Virginia at War, 1864*. University Press of Kentucky, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8131-2562-6

Essays on the Virginia War Experience

Virginia at War, 1864, is the fourth volume in a series that explores the nature of “vital home front matters” specifically in the Old Dominion. As in previous volumes, a diverse group of authors tackle aspects related to transportation, education, agriculture, literature, newspapers, and even a notable effort to shed the two-party system that had long dominated national politics. The individual essays are cogent and well-researched; more importantly, they connect common threads that reveal a state in turmoil, simultaneously undergoing important social changes that would extend far beyond the war. Virginia in 1864 was a state filled with hunger, mourning, exhaustion, but also surprising energy, innovation and spirit.

The reader of previous volumes will find this to be a familiar companion, rich in detail, but also diverse in narrative voice and well-researched. As in other volumes, the final segment is an excerpt from *Diary of a Southern Refugee during the War, June 1863—July 1864*, by Judith Brockenbrough McGuire, as edited and annotated by James I. Robertson Jr. Many of the aforementioned themes are quite readily made concrete in her first-hand account of the period, a “singularly rough and uneven” time of “grim-visaged war” (205). Brockenbrough McGuire is a compelling author, speaking of the birth of her first grandchild next to accounts of helping terribly wounded soldiers recently removed from the front.

This work adds to a growing body of writing that reframes the conflict in more dynamic terms than simple battlefield accounts, weaving social context and individual experience into the messy fabric of war. Though military actions always seem, on the surface, to be driving political and social events (and are

covered adequately in the first essay by Richard J. Sommers), these collective essays challenge the privileged position of battle accounts, suggesting that a much more complicated and seminal experience took place. They reveal an experience remarkably comparable to the turmoil Americans have experienced in more recent wars and conflicts.

Though perfectly readable and valuable in its own right, this volume deserves to be read and kept in relationship to the previous volumes. On the other hand, the war came to Virginia in 1864 in a way it never did in any other state. Even Georgia, unhappy victim of Sherman's famous march, saw many areas of the state escape direct attention. Virginia was not so lucky.

Virginia at War, 1864, brings that experience into brighter light, exposing the civilian war experience which often required a dozen individual actions on the home front to keep one soldier in Lee's thinning front ranks. The grim determination to keep fighting, in spite of the hardship and personal loss, the controversy in small towns and counties about continuing to support the war effort, all foreshadow a forthcoming climatic volume for the year 1865 in the near future.

Jack Trammell teaches at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia and writes for many publications and journals about the Civil War.